



Thacker, J. (2016). Forming Livestock: Hughes and Husbandry from Mexborough to Moortown. *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, 4(2), 48-54.

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via The Ted Hughes Society at <http://thetedsociety.org/the-ted-hughes-society-journal-1/>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/abr-terms/>

Forming Livestock: Hughes and Husbandry from Mexborough to Moortown

Jack Thacker

As Laura Webb has pointed out, ‘Hughes is termed an “animal poet” more readily than almost anything else.’¹ But why look at animals in the poetry of Ted Hughes? In an essay entitled ‘Why Look at Animals?’ the writer and critic John Berger observes that in ‘the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them.’² He goes on to say: ‘The cultural marginalisation of animals is, of course, a more complex process than their physical marginalisation. The animals of the mind cannot be so easily dispersed. Sayings, dreams, games, stories, superstitions, the language itself, recall them.’³ Hughes’s ‘animals of the mind’ testify to Berger’s claim on the imagination. Readers of Hughes may according to Berger ‘live without’ animals, but through his ‘sayings, dreams, games, stories, superstitions,’ and most of all through his language, such creatures are brought back to mind. This essay seeks to observe the animals Hughes cultivated throughout his life, the creatures he formed in verse and those he farmed as livestock.

According to Berger, it is not merely animals that are disappearing. Those who have cared for and thought deeply about them are at risk too. He continues his essay by arguing that

The marginalisation of animals is today being followed by the marginalisation and disposal of the only class who, throughout history, has remained familiar with animals and maintained the wisdom which accompanies that familiarity: the middle and small peasant. The basis of this wisdom is an acceptance of the dualism at the very origin of the relation between man and animal.’⁴

¹ Webb, Laura, ‘Mythology, Mortality and Memorialization: Animal and Human Endurance in Hughes’ Poetry,’ in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, eds. Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 33-47 (p.34).

² John Berger, ‘Why look at Animals?’, *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), p. 11.

³ Berger, p. 15.

⁴ Berger, pp. 26-28.

It is the act of husbandry in which Berger locates the origins of cultural wisdom; caring for animals in order to harvest them really is a matter of life and death, and the hands-on involvement of labourers in this process demands a daily acceptance of the concept of mortality. As we shall see, Hughes's lifelong engagement with animals gives rise to poems which themselves seek to negotiate the dualism of life and death. They also document the decline of an *agricultural* way of life which is lived in close proximity to other creatures.

It is in this regard, however, that Hughes's animal poems could be seen as contradictory. For the philosopher Mary Midgley, the difference between animal life and human life in fact becomes increasingly marked 'when people start keeping flocks and herds – still more so [...] with agriculture.'⁵ According to Midgley, agriculture 'seems to be the point where the clash of interests between humans and other creatures became too sharp to be smoothed over by mythical identification.'⁶ What Midgley defines as 'mythical identification' plays no small part in Hughes's feelings about and representations of animals. Yet in his poems about livestock in particular, this is often balanced against a sense – sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit – that the agricultural process undermines the creature's cultural value. This essay traces Hughes's efforts to reconcile his cultivation of animals on the page with his cultivation of animals on the farm. I am not proposing that Hughes's poetry resolves the contradiction raised by Berger's and Midgley's arguments, only that his agricultural verse contains all the conflicts and complexities which are at the heart of the subject and experience of farming more generally.

At the end of the agricultural process is the dead animal, the food product. In 'View of a Pig', from *Lupercal* (1960), Hughes's depiction of the creature's carcass inhibits empathy

⁵ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 164.

⁶ Midgley, p. 165.

and identification. As ‘the pig [lies] on the barrow dead,’ all the speaker can manage is to comment upon its mass:

Such weight and thick pink bulk
Set in death seemed not just dead.
It was less than lifeless, further off.
It was like a sack of wheat. (CP 75-6)

Spoken entirely in the past tense, every single one of the poem’s nine four line stanzas ends with a full stop, emphasising the full stop on the animal’s life. The pig is now merely identified by its consumable parts, as ‘just so much / a poundage of lard and pork.’ (CP 76) Various different kinds of acoustic repetition create a sense of proportion, not just in terms of size but also in terms of just what the pig’s existence has amounted to. The alliteration of ‘thick pink bulk’ bring the stresses down smack on these consonants, verbally enacting how its hide is ‘thumped [...] without remorse’ by the speaker. The echo of these notes in ‘sack’ package the sense that the pig has well and truly been harvested, compounded by the half-rhyme of ‘weight’ in ‘wheat’. The pig is ‘less than lifeless’, merely an object or even an inconvenience – ‘how could it be moved? / And the trouble of cutting it up’. Even in such close quarters, there is an irreconcilable and irrevocable distance between the onlooker and the pig; it is ‘too dead’ for empathy and therefore ‘further off’.

Also from *Lupercal*, ‘The Bull Moses’ observes its subject across such an abyss of estrangement. This time the speaker stares into darkness of a shed:

Then, slowly, as onto the mind’s eye –
The brow like masonry, the deep-keeled neck:
Something come up there onto the brink of the gulf,
Hadn’t heard of the world, too deep in itself to be called to,
Stood in sleep. He would swing his muzzle at a fly
But the square of sky where I hung, shouting, waving,
Was nothing to him (CP 74)

Hughes frames the creature by enclosing it within a structure – even the anatomy of the beast is described in architectural terms: its ‘brow [is] like masonry’ and its neck ‘deep-keeled’.

The proportions of the shed also frame the world for the bull, with the speaker presented pictorially as a figure in a ‘square of sky’. No matter how much the speaker tries to attract the beast’s attention by ‘shouting [and] waving’, all attempts at a common language, however rudimentary, fall on deaf ears. To quote Berger, the bull’s silence ‘guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man.’⁷

Yet despite its otherness, ‘The Bull Moses’ does not merely represent the sum of its parts. It may be what Paul Bentley terms ‘*intractable*’ but it is also equally as mysterious.⁸ Presiding in the shadows, the half-formed bull becomes both individual (an animal with a name) and general – even platonic – as an embodiment of all *Bos taurus*. In a letter to his sister Olwyn in the fifties, Hughes explains how the creature in the poem ‘is the bull on Oats’ farm over old Denaby, but also of course a creature within the head,’ claiming he got the idea from the ‘Taurus’ in astrology. (LTH 125) There is already the sense in ‘The Bull Moses’ that the symbolic and the autobiographical come together in the form of the poem, with Hughes readily incorporating the specificities of his childhood experience of farming in Mexborough into a mythological framework.

Elsewhere in his correspondence with Olwyn he remarks that ‘The Bull Moses’ is his ‘favourite’ poem in *Lupercal*. (LTH 129) Bearing in mind Hughes’s anthropological disposition to trace culture back to nature, it is easy to understand why this poem in particular had such a purchase on his imagination. The bull is after all an important figure in both Pagan and Christian iconography; hence the Biblical namesake of the animal in the poem. Citing ‘the overwhelming presence of bovines in cave art,’ Linda Kalof explains how certain species ‘played a particularly important role in the human perception of creation, birth, life and death,

⁷ Berger, p. 6.

⁸ Paul Bentley refers to the carcass in ‘View of a Pig’ as “‘*intractable*” (it cannot be “moved” within or by language)’ in *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond* (Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), p. 19.

and no species was so critical to human civilisation as cattle.’⁹ In antiquity, the cultural significance of an animal reflected its economic value; early civilisations were dependent upon bulls for their survival and success and therefore there was an increased level of identification with bovine species.

When Hughes acquired land in Devon with his wife Carol in the seventies he fulfilled a lifelong ambition to farm his own livestock. However, in a letter sent to his brother Gerald at the time he complains of the economic plight of small-scale farmers, expressing how it was a ‘miracle’ he had not already gone bankrupt. (LTH 358) In the same letter, Hughes mentions the ‘purchase’ of a ‘phenomenal bull’ named Sexton Hyades XXXIII, expressing how he has ‘never enjoyed owning anything 1/10 as much [...] It isn’t just his incredible size & beauty—he has a strange, sweet nature, in every respect like an unusual person.’ This is a very different incarnation of Taurus to that of ‘The Bull Moses’; Hughes’s economic and aesthetic appreciations of Sexton’s form encapsulate the contradictions which lie at the heart of agriculture. The bull is both his property and his familiar, a purchase with a personality.

If the bull has pride of place in Hughes’s material possessions, he also grants it prominence among his literary assets. For Hughes this bull might well be the most literary bovine creature ever to grace the fields of Devon, or anywhere for that matter. Craig Raine tells the story of how Hughes would show off his prize bull to visiting poets and invite them to compose poems in its honour.¹⁰ Raine himself manages a stanza in a longer poem, entitled ‘Rich’. He writes:

And this is her bull
Drooling over his dummy,
His angular buttocks
Crusted with cradle cap.¹¹

⁹ Linda Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion, 2007), p. 11.

¹⁰ Craig Raine, *Haydn and the Valve Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1990), p. 495.

¹¹ Raine, p. 498.

Hughes's response indicates just how particular he was about the literary life of his bull:

'Great,' he replies, 'but I hope that isn't *our* bull. His buttocks aren't angular at all.'¹² Hughes wrote his own poem about Sexton entitled 'Hoof Trimming' which until recently remained unpublished. The poem describes how the bull's hooves have grown out of shape and need to be treated. Hughes documents the process whereby the bull is herded into a cattle-crush (a caged instrument used for containing and demobilising cattle) and the hooves are trimmed back:

[...] The crooked slipper of hoof
Begins to shape up. But nestled in the core –
Something painful. The blade's found it. Sexton

Signals every touch. The knife sculpts.
Returns to the guilty quick. Sexton cries
No No in the language
We can ignore.¹³

As in 'The Bull Moses', it is language which separates the human from the animal and language which Hughes uses to form the creature on the page. Yet this is a more sympathetic handling of livestock to that of the earlier poem. Both the bull and the poet are sensitive to 'every touch' of the knife, which 'sculpts' rather than cuts. Nestled in the core of the poem is the guilt of the farmer but the action is carried out in the knowledge that the pain caused is a healing one and that the hand is anaesthetising as well as aestheticizing. The language of the bull may be ignored but in this case it is understood. Despite sculpting numerous drafts and typescripts of this poem, Hughes chose not to publish it in his lifetime – perhaps as a testament to his personal investment in the animal represented. The poem was published

¹² Raine, p. 498. Sexton the bull also features in a poem by Leslie Norris and Charles E. Wadsworth, entitled 'The Beautiful Young Devon Shorthorn Bull, Sexton Hyades XXXIII,' Leslie Norris, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Meic Stephens (Bridgend: Seren, 2008), p. 218.

¹³ British Library ADD Ms. 88918/1/55. Ted Hughes, 'Hoot-trimming,' *The Spectator*, February 19, 2015, accessed July 18, 2016, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/09/hoof-trimming/>.

posthumously by the Ted Hughes Estate last year in *The Spectator*, with a note explaining that it was originally written for the farming sequence, 'Moortown'.

Despite his absence in the Moortown sequence, Sexton does appear on the half-title page of Hughes's 1979 volume *Moortown* in the form of an illustration by Hughes himself.¹⁴ What is remarkable is how much this drawing resembles a cave painting in its bold strokes and side-on profile. Marking the entrance to the collection, the drawing announces the unprecedented role animals are to play in its contents. *Moortown* is comprised of a number of sequential works that Hughes composed throughout the seventies in the wake of *Crow*, including 'Prometheus on his Crag', 'Earth Numb' and 'Adam and the Sacred Nine', all of which feature an array of animal spirit forms. The first section of the book, simply entitled 'Moortown', centres on Hughes's experiences farming livestock in Devon with his wife Carol and father-in-law, Jack Orchard, who died in 1976; the sequence is dedicated to his memory. The complex publication history of the 'Moortown' sequence is suggestive of the variety and flexibility of the animal and verse forms which populate it. In 1978, the sequence was published as a Rainbow Press special edition entitled *Moortown Elegies*. In 1979, the year of its publication in *Moortown*, a number of poems from the sequence were included in Michael Morpurgo's *All Around the Year*, alongside prose and notes by Morpurgo on agricultural matters such as the ailments of sheep and livestock market prices, as well as photographs by the Devonian rural documentary photographer James Ravilious. Most significantly, in 1989, the sequence was republished with an additional preface and agricultural notes, this time written by Hughes himself, under the title *Moortown Diary*. As

¹⁴ Hughes illustration also featured as a gilt image on the front cover of the Rainbow Press special edition of *Moortown Elegies*.

Edward Hadley has noted, the change in titles are also ‘indicators of tone’, with the emphasis shifting increasingly from the elegiac to the diurnal and down-to-earth.¹⁵

In the ‘Preface’ to *Moortown Diary*, Hughes paints the Devonshire countryside as the vestiges of a primitive way of life, associating its inhabitants with the ‘the Celtic tribe the Romans had known as the *Dumnoni*, “the people of the deep valleys”.’ (CP 1203) He also charts the decline of traditional farming practices in the wake of the ‘technological revolutions and international market madness’ that was part of the post-war ‘seismic upheaval’ in agriculture. (CP 1204) In this respect, the poems in *Moortown Diary* are written from a perspective that bears a resemblance to what Greg Garrard has referred to as the ‘socialist georgic’ outlook of Berger (*berger* meaning ‘shepherd’ in French).¹⁶ Berger’s ‘middle and small peasant’ is incarnated in *Moortown* in the form of farmer Jack Orchard. Hughes’s elegies to Orchard present him as a tribal ‘Masai figure’ (he also is keen to point out that the ‘Hartland Orchards have a crest: a raven’), part of a ‘tradition of farmers who seem equal to any job, any crisis, using the most primitive means,’ a description which could equally characterise Hughes’s linguistic handling of his own livestock in the volume. (CP 536, 1210-11)

If the emphasis in Hughes’s early animal poems is on death and detachment, the focus in *Moortown Diary*, as Hughes puts it, is on ‘nursing [animals] against what often seem to be the odds.’ (CP 1209) In a poem entitled ‘Surprise’, the speaker describes what appears to be a miraculous birth. Like most of the poems in the collection it begins almost out of the blue. Long gone are the oppressive formal dimensions of *Lupercal*; instead Hughes employs enjambment to create a sense of fluidity – only three of the poem’s thirty-two lines are end-

¹⁵ Edward Hadley, *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 71.

¹⁶ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2004), p. 118. I’m grateful to Hugh Haughton for this observation.

stopped. Here, the act of looking at cows is reciprocal, with the speaker ‘sharing their trance’.
(CP 515) Midway through the poem, the speaker notices a strange shape at the back of a cow:

[...] Crazy far thoughts
Proposed themselves as natural, and I almost
Looked away. Suddenly
The apron slithered, and a whole calf’s
Buttocks and hind-legs – whose head and forefeet
Had been hidden from me by another cow –
Toppled out of its mother, and collapsed on the ground. (CP 515)

In the optical illusion of the anthropoid image of the apron, Hughes witnesses his own reflection, as the barriers that separate the human and the animal ‘collapse’ in the wake of familiarity. The calf’s delivery is both profound and bathetic, part of the everyday rhythm of the agricultural life-cycle. Throughout the course of the sequence the extraordinary is married to the habitual, as Hughes fashions an everyday language which neither venerates nor cripples its animals as subjects. Commenting on the form and style of the sequence in general, Hughes refers to the poems as ‘casual journal notes,’ hence the diary element of *Moortown Diary*. In ‘Surprise’, the slippage of Hughes’s tenses enables him to keep the discourse casual, much as the ‘mother’ appears ‘leisurely’ in her labour. (CP 515) There is a sense in many of the poems that the action is ongoing, that entries are beginning *in media res*, that is to say, in the middle of the process. In the ‘Preface,’ Hughes claims that the writing method he used ‘excludes the poetic process’, cultivating the sense that the poems are unfinished. (CP 1205) In this regard, the poetic process and the agricultural process are analogous. Hughes’s interest in keeping his animal forms alive applies to his verses as much as it does to the flocks and herds in his care.

Things do not always go as smoothly as in ‘Surprise’, however. In ‘February 17th’, Hughes describes how on one occasion ‘A lamb could not get born’ and how, as a result, he had to intervene. (CP 518) The solution to this impasse is symbolic as well as situational. Hughes describes how he cut ‘the head off / To stare at its mother, its pipes sitting in the mud

/ With all earth for a body.’ (CP 519) These lines are reminiscent of Hughes at his most abstract and mythological and yet the diurnal title of the poem, along with the localised title of the collection, grounds the language in a specific time and place. This interweaving of the practical and spiritual is typical of the combination of practical knowledge and familial wisdom at work in the volume. Take ‘Orf’ for instance, where accompanying notes explain the symptoms of the animal’s affliction, while the poem describes, in compassionate terms, the departure of the soul from the dead lamb’s body, as Hughes writes how the ‘lamb life’ stood up before him ‘asking for permission to be extinct.’ (CP 523)

Berger states that the vestiges of the dualism between the animal kingdom and humankind ‘remain among those who live intimately with, and depend upon, animals. A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork.’¹⁷ What is significant for Berger is that the two apparently contradictory statements in that last sentence are ‘connected by an *and* and not by a *but*.’ Hughes does not concern himself with the slaughtering of animals in *Moortown Diary* – there are no views of lambs or cattle skinned and ready to be butchered, and only a passing mention of livestock markets. (CP 534-5) Yet the agricultural process is what facilitates the intimacy of the encounters with animals in the collection. The lack of empathy on display in ‘View of a Pig’ gives way in Hughes’s later work to an acceptance of the paradox which lies at the heart of caring for creatures in order to kill them. In this regard, the relationship between the farmer and the sheep and cattle in the poems is one which could be defined, like that of Berger’s two statements, by parataxis. ‘February 17th’ closes with the line: ‘And the body lay born, beside the hacked off head.’ (CP 519) The use of the ‘And’ places the line on an equal footing with all that has come before it: the violence and the struggle of both man *and* animal. It also places death and life on an equal footing; the body is born despite the lamb being deceased, with the head and the body lying side by side

¹⁷ Berger, p. 11.

representing both life and death. While Hughes's relationship with animals may be compromised by his agricultural experiences, in his poetry he is able to make peace with the price he pays for the connection.